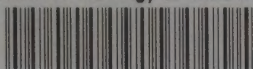


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HODISM AND
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essor Milton S. Terry, D.D.

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Methodism and Biblical Criticism.

The chief characteristic of Methodism, as an epochal religious movement of modern Christianity, is the emphasis it has put upon self-conscious spiritual life. "Our main doctrines, which include all the rest," said John Wesley, "are Repentance, Faith and Holiness. The first of these we account, as it were, the porch of religion; the next is the door; the third is religion itself." At Wesley's first Conference, in 1744, the first two days were devoted to the question of what should be the chief staple of Methodist preaching, and the unanimous conclusion was that they should keep clear of all theological subtlety, and make prominent the doctrines of repentance, faith, justification, sanctification, and the witness of the Spirit. And this has been the glory of Arminian Methodism for over a hundred and fifty years. Wesley's thirteen discourses on the Sermon on the Mount declare that wonderful sermon of our Lord to be "the sum of true religion." And I may add that first, last, fundamental and positive, the source of the life and power of Methodism, is her firm immediate hold on the Supernatural. Her abiding watchword for living and for dying is, "The best of all is, GOD IS WITH US."

Another notable feature of Methodism is the broad, catholic spirit it has shown. Among John Wesley's sermons we find one entitled "A Caution Against Bigotry." It is immediately followed by another on "The Catholic Spirit." This providential founder of Methodism was accustomed to boast of the liberality of Methodism. We do not impose human opinions, he often argued, as a test of membership in our societies. "One condition, and one only, is required, a real desire to save their souls. Where that is, it is enough." In a letter to the Rev. Mr. Venn he says: "I impose my notions upon none. I will be bold to say there is no man living farther from it. I make no opinion the term of union with any man. I think and let think. What I want is holiness of heart and life. They who have this are my brother, sister and mother." In his *Journal* of May, 1778, he writes: "There is no other religious society under heaven which requires of men, in order to their admission into it, nothing but a desire to save their souls. The Methodists alone do not insist on your holding this or that opinion, but they think and let think. I do not know any other religious society, either ancient or modern, wherein such liberty of conscience is now allowed, since the age of the apostles. Here is our glorying; and a glorying peculiar to us."

But it must not be supposed from these utterances that either Wesley or his followers made light of fundamental truths. In his sermon on the "Catholic Spirit" he declares that the true catholic spirit is "not speculative latitudinarianism. It is not an indifference to all opinions: this is the spawn of hell, not the offspring of heaven." It was agreed at the first conference that the great, practical, fundamental doctrines

of Christianity should be the main substance of the Methodist preaching and teaching. The simplicity and self-evidencing authority of their principal doctrines, and the conviction that such truths needed only a fair hearing to be generally accepted, made those fathers of Methodism perfectly willing to allow all reasonable liberties of thought.

What I wish here and now to note is that this wide liberty of opinion,—the boast and glory of John Wesley in the organization of his societies,—*was at that time a new thing under the sun*. The whole world was publicly challenged to show another religious body like it under the wide heaven. Other churches had their prescriptive and proscriptive creeds, and confessions, and dogmatic tests of membership. But Wesley was gifted with the spiritual discernment to anticipate Neander in contending that “it is the *heart* that makes the theologian.” His sole great question was, “Is thy heart herein as my heart? If it be, give me thy hand.”

From this rapid glance at the fundamental and characteristic position of Methodism as to spiritual life and catholicity I pass to a notice of the pre-eminence it has always assigned the Holy Scriptures as the supreme rule of faith and practice. Originating within the Church of England, it naturally and most loyally accepted the declaration of the sixth of the historic 39 Articles, which declares that “the Holy Scriptures contain all things necessary to salvation; so that whatsoever is not read therein, nor may be proved thereby, is not to be required of any man that it should be believed as an article of faith.” In his sermon on “God’s Vineyard,” Wesley says that the first four Oxford Methodists were each of them “a man of one book. God taught them

all to make his word a lantern to their feet and a light in all their paths. They had one, and only one, rule of judgment with regard to all their tempers, words and actions, namely, the oracles of God. They were one and all determined to be Bible Christians." There is, then, and there can be no question as to the high place the Bible holds in the estimate of Methodism.

But when we ask, Who is the authorized interpreter, or who are the authorized interpreters, of these scriptures for the Methodist world, what shall we say? Is John Wesley our Pope to pronounce *ex cathedra* what critical opinions must be accepted as to the origin and composition of the different books of the Bible? Are his Notes on the New Testament and his other expositions a finality for us in exposition? Must we be open to censure if we decline to accept all he affirms in his sermon on "The Cause and Cure of Earthquakes?" May one not be a good, loyal Methodist, sound in doctrine and discipline, and yet reject the teaching of Wesley in his famous sermon on the brute creation, that by reason of the sin of Adam the whole animal world has been made subject to pain and all manner of evils, and even insects and worms lost the high intelligence they previously possessed, but that they are all hereafter to be delivered from this deplorable condition, and that when man is made equal to angels, the kid and the cow and the wolf may be made equal to what we are now?

Now, in the full light of the actual teachings of the founders of Methodism and of the relevant facts of some four generations of Methodist history, we may safely affirm the proposition that, aside from those fundamental truths which formed the staple of Methodist preaching, there exists no prescriptive creed, confession, law, rule or

standard of Methodism which defines or determines our liberty of thought and opinion on matters of biblical criticism and interpretation. Accepting the canonical Scriptures, both of the Old Testament and the New, as given by inspiration of God, and profitable for comfort, for teaching, for reproof, for correction and for instruction in righteousness, all questions of higher and of lower criticism are to be treated as matters of personal opinion. Whether it be a question of criticism or interpretation on which all the Methodist fathers agree, or a question on which they differ, no one among us, whether he be minister or layman, is necessarily shut up to any such opinion of the fathers. To contend for the contrary of this statement would seem to be the extreme of presumption. The question of the authorship of any particular book, or set of books, is not a matter of essential doctrine. Every Methodist commentator on the Epistle to the Hebrews, so far as I know, from John Wesley to D. D. Whedon, maintains the Pauline authorship. But must that uniformity of opinion be therefore regarded as a finality of investigation, so that if one, following the steady drift of scholarly opinion for the last forty years, finds that no distinguished commentary on Hebrews, except Whedon's, that has appeared for half a century past, accepts that older view, he is not at liberty to follow the all but unanimous modern opinion because Wesley, and Clarke, and Benson, and Coke, and Watson, and Whedon thought otherwise? Surely on such a question, and with such facts before him, no one is bound even by the unanimous opinion of revered fathers, when upon careful examination he discovers other views and other arguments of more convincing and more satisfactory character.

But if on critical questions in which the fathers were agreed we claim the right of differing from them in opinion, much more may we claim that liberty on matters wherein they differed among themselves. Let us first notice what Wesley says about himself as an expositor of the New Testament. His "Explanatory Notes upon The New Testament" occupy no secondary place among the Methodist standards. If there is anything of the nature of authoritative interpretation of any part of the Bible among the Methodists, it is these "Notes" of Wesley on the New Testament. And yet, in the Preface of his work, the author observes three things which we do well to consider. ¹First he expresses his own deep sense of inability and want of learning, experience, and wisdom for the important task. ²Then he advises the reader that his *notes* were not principally designed for men of learning, who are provided with many other helps; but he writes for plain, unlettered men. ³He furthermore informs us that he has appropriated most of his comments from a work of Bengel, a German professor and critic, who had died some three years before the date of his Preface to the "Notes."

Let us now ponder for a moment the significance of these utterances of Wesley as against the supposition that a faithful and loyal Methodist preacher is not at liberty to differ from the views of the founder of Methodism in matters of biblical criticism and interpretation. No matter what new discoveries have been made since 1754, no matter what contributions have been made to biblical science during a hundred and fifty years, no matter how clear and convincing other views than those of Wesley have become to scores and hundreds of "men of long and deep experience in the ways and word of God,"

at whose feet Wesley says in that same Preface he would like "to sit and to learn," no matter if half or two thirds of the best known scholars of Christendom outside of Methodism offer other critical opinions which they believe better conserve the views of Christ and of Paul, and "justify the ways of God to man;" no matter if all the world think otherwise, no honest Methodist can think otherwise and continue as a consistent member or minister of the Methodist Church! I am slow to believe that we have any among us who would seriously presume to maintain a position so unreasonable. What! After all that we have quoted from Wesley himself, his boast of the liberty of opinion enjoyed in his societies, his emphatic repetition of the phrase "think and let think," and in spite of his disclaimer in the Preface to his New Testament "Notes" of any superior wisdom and ability as an expounder of the Scriptures, shall we rise up in these later days and forbid the liberty which he extolled?

We turn next to examine a few specimens of Wesley's critical opinions. In his first note on the New Testament, speaking of the genealogy of Jesus Christ and its difficulties as compared with that of Luke, he observes that "if there were any difficulties which could not easily be removed, they would rather affect the Jewish tables than the credit of the evangelists." "Nor was it needful that they should correct the mistakes, if there were any." He further argues that, as their chief aim was to show "that Jesus was of the family from which the promised seed was to come," these New Testament genealogies, even if they contained errors, would have "had more weight with the Jews for the purpose than if alterations had been made by inspiration itself." I cannot

but imagine what a turmoil would be made in some quarters if only some radical "higher critic" should publish such a statement as this. For this very first comment of John Wesley on the New Testament involves the following propositions: (1) The Jewish Tables of Old Testament genealogy may contain some mistakes. (2) Such mistakes would not invalidate but might even be a help in accomplishing the purpose of the evangelists with Jewish readers. (3) Even divine inspiration itself employed in correcting the records would have been less effectual in influencing the Jews in this matter. (4) Would it not logically follow that, if any errors exist in the Old Testament records, and if they can be made to serve a good purpose, it may be better even for divine inspiration to let them stand for such supposable good uses rather than correct them?

In the textual criticism of the New Testament Wesley did not hesitate to make changes where occasion seemed to him to require it. He tells us in his Preface that he embodied in his text those various readings which Bengel had shown to have a vast majority of ancient copies and translations on their side. But as one noteworthy example of his following the great German critic into error, observe what he says about the text of the "three heavenly witnesses" in John V, 7: "What Bengelius has advanced concerning the authority of the controverted verse will abundantly satisfy any impartial person." The same opinion is in substance repeated in his sermon "On the Trinity," which he bases on this questionable passage. Coke and Benson adopt the view of Wesley, but Adam Clarke, who stands pre-eminent as critic and commentator among the older Methodists, tells us that this famous text "is wanting in every manuscript of this epistle

written before the invention of printing, one excepted. It is wanting in both the Syriac, all the Arabic, Ethiopic, Coptic, Sahadic, Armenian, Slavonian; in a word, in all the ancient versions but the Vulgate; and even of this version many of the most ancient and correct manuscripts have it not." In Dr. Whedon's commentary on the passage, published 24 years ago, we read: "Scholars are agreed, at the present day, that this entire verse is not genuine; being a late interpolation and not the words of St. John." In the Revised Version of our Bible this text is omitted, and there is not an intimation even in the margin that it ever existed.

Turning now to the Old Testament for a few specimens of the agreement and disagreement of the great exegetes among the Methodist fathers, we find Wesley commenting on Numbers XII, 3 ("Now the man Moses was very meek," etc.) as follows: "Probably this commendation was added, as some other clauses were, by some succeeding prophet. How was Moses so meek, when we often read of his anger?" Clarke, however, was not satisfied with Wesley's suggestions, and argued that the Hebrew word translated *meek* may mean *depressed*, or *afflicted*. But Dr. Coke does not agree either with Wesley or Clarke, and he insists that it was perfectly proper for Moses, under the circumstances, to have written this encomium of himself, and that St. Paul and even our Savior himself were driven into magnifying themselves by the malignity of their enemies. Benson quotes Wesley's comment word for word, without acknowledgement, but Wesley's comments are taken from Poole's "Annotations."

All the Methodist commentaries, including Whedon's, appear to adopt the literal historicity

of Joshua's commanding the sun to stand still, but Dr. Daniel Steele, who wrote the notes on Joshua, says that we may "regard these remarkable verses as a parenthesis thrown into the narrative by the author himself, or by a later hand, and taken from the book of Jasher mentioned in verse 13." Wesley devotes nearly two pages to these verses, and remarks on the mention of the two places, Gibeon and Ajalon, that we are not to suppose that "the sun stood over the one and the moon over the other, which is absurd, especially these places being so near the one to the other." He holds that the mention of two places so near each other was designed "partly to vary the phrase, as is common in poetical passages." He also observes that the moon was stopped also, not because Joshua "needed the moon's light, but because it was fit, either that both sun and moon should go or that both should stand still to prevent disorder in the heavenly bodies." In the light of such a comment one naturally asks, whether the other heavenly bodies of our solar system, such as Venus, and Mars, and Jupiter, must not also have stood still for the same reason? Wesley's comment on the "Book of Jasher," in which this account of the sun and moon standing still is said to have been written, is also noteworthy. "This book," he says, "was written and published before Joshua wrote his, and so is fitly alluded [alleged] here." Is it out of place here to note the absence of critical acumen, first, in the platitude that the book of Jasher was written and published before it was quoted or alluded to; and second, in the failure anywhere to explain to us how it is that a book, written and published before the time of Joshua, contained also David's lamentation over Saul and Jonathan, which was written at least 300 years after Joshua's time? In

2 Samuel I, 18, where this fact is stated, Wesley's commentary has not even a suggestion to offer. This is one of the places where it would seem "good Homer was dozing," for usually John Wesley was not deficient in critical acumen. But we are not to forget that most of these comments of Wesley are taken word for word from Matthew Poole's "Annotations upon the Holy Bible."

Wesley's comments on the Psalms are comparatively few and meager, but we should make mention of the fact that in his "Sunday Service of the Methodists in North America" he took great liberty in abridging the Psalter, and he wrote in the Preface: "Many psalms are left out, and many parts of others, as being highly improper for the mouths of a Christian congregation." In his Preface to the Psalms he observes that these ancient songs of Israel are not all from David, but by many different authors of various times, some in the time of the Babylonian exile. It is notorious that Adam Clarke was very bold in questioning the Davidic authorship of the 23d and 51st Psalms, which have been all but universally attributed to the great king of Judah. He declares his opinion that the 23d psalm was written after the captivity, and he cites Bishop Horsley and Dr. Kennicott to show that the title to psalm 51 is misplaced, and that it must have been written during the captivity. He is very positive in the conviction that, whether the title be misplaced or not, the last two verses of the psalm do not fit the subject of the preceding verses nor the times of David. They are rather a prayer of some one of the captives in Babylon for the redemption of Zion and the rebuilding of Jerusalem. It is also a noteworthy fact that Clarke questioned the Solomonic authorship of Ecclesiastes, pointing to the fact that the style

is that of writers who lived after the exile, and declaring his opinion that the attempts to deny this are often trifling and generally ineffectual.

Adam Clarke's peculiar views touching the possible salvation of Judas Iscariot, and his contention that the foreknowledge of God is merely the exercise of omniscience in its *power to know*, not in a necessary knowledge of things, are notorious. In both these matters he has found not a few sympathetic followers. But his most notable departure from the current orthodoxy was his persistent denial of the eternal sonship of Christ. In his notes on Luke I, 35, he says that the doctrine "is anti-scriptural and highly dangerous." He offers five reasons for his opinion, and declares his belief that the enemies of Christ's divinity have in all ages availed themselves of this incautious method of treating the divine nature of Christ to the great damage of the true faith. "This doctrine of the eternal Sonship," he says, "destroys the Deity of Christ; now, if his Deity be taken away, the whole gospel of redemption is ruined. The very use of the phrase is both absurd and dangerous. Therefore let all those who value Jesus and their salvation abide by the scriptures." He even declares that eternal Sonship "an awful heresy." "From such heterodoxies, and their abettors, may God save his Church! Amen!"

This was no hasty opinion of Adam Clarke. He had talked it over with Wesley more than thirty years before the date of these notes on Luke. His brethren generally differed from him on this point. The teaching of Watson's *Institutes*, though published before Clarke's notes on the Gospels, maintains the doctrine of the eternal generation, and has been followed by the great majority of Methodist preachers and divines.

The foregoing facts have been presented to show the glaring impropriety, not to say the absurdity, of anyone now pretending that we, earnest and loyal Methodists of the twentieth century, are not at liberty to accept the interpretations of Scripture and the critical views prevalent in our time, if they are seen to differ from those of the founders and fathers of Methodism.* Observe, it is no question of any of the great practical truths of Arminian Methodist theology that we are here discussing. There has never been in the entire history of our Arminian Methodism any considerable dispute over matters of fundamental doctrine. Our record in this respect is that of a beautiful and glorious unity of faith. No doctrine of religion enunciated in our 25 Articles, or in our General Rules, or in any other recognized standard, is compromised by the differences of opinion among the fathers, or among the sons, on such matters of biblical criticism as we have been presenting. If any one is persuaded in his mind that Adam Clarke's views on a critical question are preferable to those of Wesley, he ought to feel at full liberty to adopt them. He may with equal liberty prefer to abide by the views of Wesley or some other. That is his right as an honest Methodist, and his plain duty as a conscientious Christian. And if we find that

*The peculiar views of Dr. Clarke on the divine Sonship of Christ, on the doctrine of omniscience, on the doom of Judas, and on some other questions, never exposed him to the charge of being an "infidel," a "hypocrite," a "rationalist," or a "destructive critic," which terms have been freely heaped upon some modern Methodists, who maintain views no more radical than his on these same points of criticism. In full knowledge of his views the British Conference three times elected him its president. Such election was no endorsement of his views, but it was a monumental declaration to the world that differences of opinion on such matters, even where a prominent man seemed to stand comparatively alone in his opinions, were not regarded as unlawful or dangerous.

on some critical questions the drift of opinion is away from the views, universally accepted in Wesley's time, and contrary to those maintained by all the early Methodists, no faithful student of the Holy Scriptures should feel himself tied up to old opinions when he sees or believes them to be superseded by a better exposition.

In further illustration of my argument let me remind you of Richard Watson's defense of the Mosaic chronology as he understood it, and "the manner in which the world was framed." He contends that the creation described in the first chapter of the Bible "signifies production out of nothing;" he rejects the interpretation that the "days" of Genesis are to be understood as long periods of time, corresponding to the geological periods of the earth's formation; he rejects also the hypothesis of Chalmers, that the six days of Genesis were subsequent to the geological ages, and are confined solely to an arrangement of things at the beginning of the human era; and he gives his approval rather to a theory of Granville Penn, who maintains that the primitive rocks, the wood of the primitive trees, and "the first bone of the first man," were not and could not have been formed by any natural processes, but were produced in form and completeness just as we now see them, by an immediate act of God. This globe, he tells us, has undergone two, and only two, general changes or revolutions of its substance, the first when God "gathered the waters into one place and made the dry land appear;" the second, 1656 years later, at the time of the deluge, when it "pleased God by the disruption and depression of that first earth below the level of the bed of the first sea, to produce a new bed, into which the waters descended from their former bed, leaving it to become the theater of the

future generations of mankind." The present earth is that former bed. In other words, all the geological changes and deposits in the crust of the earth and in the depths of the seas were put there by the immediate act of God on two different occasions, 1656 years apart, and also by "the presence and operation of the marine fluid during the long interval" of that period of a millennium and a half.¹

Watson's "Theological Institutes" were published in 1823,² and they have been for three generations an acknowledged standard of Methodist doctrine. For much of that time they have been the chief text-book for the theological training of Methodist preachers throughout the world. Abel Stevens pronounces Watson "one of the most commanding legislators of his Church, and its greatest theological writer." And I would like to bear my own personal witness to the value of these "Institutes." I cease not, year after year, to advise and exhort my students to read and study Watson as one who is second to no other theologian who has ever adorned the ranks of Methodist divines. But I cannot accept his interpretation of the Mosaic chronology, nor his endorsement of the views of Granville Penn. His opinions on such questions are no more binding on us than Wesley's notions about the fall and rising again of the brute creation, or than Adam Clarke's idea that the serpent of Genesis was an ape or an ourang-outang. Nor should we ignore the fact that the sciences of literary, historical and physiological criticism, as well as that of biblical interpretation, have made great advances and acquired new facilities in the century last past. The latest English translator of Bengel's *Gnomon*,

¹*Theological Institutes*, Vol. I. pp. 246-252 ; 259-262.

²That is, the First Part.

which Wesley admired so much and copied in his "Notes," affirms that "more mind and toil have been given to biblical criticism and exposition since the days of Bengel than in all time before." Wesley's "Explanatory Notes upon the Old Testament" were published some ten years after those on the New Testament, when he was in the sixty-third year of his age. In the Preface he expresses the deep conviction of his insufficiency for such a work, his want of learning, and his inability to understand or explain satisfactorily many passages of the Old Testament. He frankly speaks of "being conscious of his very imperfect acquaintance with the Hebrew tongue," and informs his readers that his own comments have been extracted in part from Henry's exposition, but much more largely from Poole's Annotations. In the light of all these facts, and of many others of the same character and purport, we are abundantly warranted in saying that, in matters of biblical criticism and exegesis, the opinions of the Methodist fathers furnish no prescriptive or proscriptive standard of belief for the modern Methodist. We are glad to study the older writers and gather from them all that is good and helpful. The vastly larger part of what they give us is, like the scripture itself, "profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction and for instruction in righteousness." But if one find that recent and more minute critical studies lead to new opinions as to the date, the composition, the authorship, the literary character of certain books, or of portions of such books; and if also he perceive that hundreds of devout scholars are of opinion that the new views better subserve the cause of truth and yield for him more satisfactory interpretations than the fathers gave, then surely no respect or reverence for old opinions should

deter him from accepting the later conclusions which to him seem better than the old. And Wesley's rule of "think and let think" ought to be his sufficient apology for an honest change of critical opinion.

It is a noteworthy fact that Wesley put the personal experience of the witness of the Spirit above all other evidences of Christianity. He maintained that the conversion of a soul to God is essentially miraculous. "I suppose," he writes, "that all who allow there is any such thing believe it to be supernatural. And what the difference is between a supernatural and a miraculous work, I am yet to learn."* It was the prevailing custom of the orthodox apologetics of Wesley's time to lay stress first of all on the "external evidences" so called, especially the historicity of the miracles recorded in the Bible. In fact, the main argument in the Deistic controversies of the eighteenth century rested upon the question of the traditional genuineness and authenticity of the books which recorded the miracles and the prophecies. But nothing in all the writings of John Wesley is more remarkable than what we read in his famous "Letter to Dr. Conyers Middleton," where he argues and insists that the internal witness of the Spirit is of a higher grade than any external and traditional testimony. He boldly declares that what he "experiences in his own breast" is of greater weight than anything which appeals to him merely from without. And so he contrasts the two in the following manner:

I. First, he argues, traditional evidence is weakened by length of time; it must pass through many hands, in a succession of ages. But no length of time can possibly affect the strength of this internal evidence.

*Letter to Rev. Mr. Potter, dated Nov. 4th, 1758. *Works*, Vol. V, p. 425.

2. Traditonal evidence is extremely complicated and taxes the brains of men of strong and clear understanding. But the internal experience is so plain and simple that a child may feel all its force.

3. Tradition stands a great way off, and gives account of what happened long ago. The inward evidence is intimately present, at all times, in all places. "It is nigh thee, in thy mouth and in thy heart."

4. Even if it were possible for the historic foundation of Christianity to be shaken (which of course Wesley nowhere concedes), still he contends that the internal evidence would remain firm and unshaken.

5. "I have been sometimes almost inclined to believe," he writes, "that the wisdom of God has, in most later ages, permitted the external evidence of Christianity to be more or less clogged and incumbered for this very end, that men (of reflection especially) might not altogether rest there, but be constrained to look into themselves also, and attend to the light shining in their hearts."

6. "Without this I cannot but doubt whether they can long maintain their cause." More stress, he urges, must be put on the internal evidence. It will be an advantage to the Christian cause, and "perhaps the speediest and the only effectual way of bringing all reasonable Deists to be Christians." Thus he puts his great emphasis on the intrinsic value of the Christian faith, and asks: "What reasonable assurance* can you have of things whereof you have no personal experience?"

In all this we cannot but note how remarkably John Wesley anticipated the trend of modern critical thought in placing the internal above the external evidences of Christianity. He thus adopted

**Works*, V, pp. 758-760.

in substance the same position and argument as the late Professor Bruce, who says: "It must be confessed that miracles cannot be offered as evidences of Christianity now with the confidence with which they were employed for this purpose by the apologists of the past age. Men do not now believe in Christ because of his miracles; they rather believe in the miracles because they have first believed in Christ. For such believers Christ is his own witness, who accredits everything connected with him: scripture, prophecy, miracle. Those who are in this happy position need no help from apologists."*

Observe that this position involves no denial of the miracles, and leaves the whole question of the historicity of certain books and narratives to be determined in its own proper way. It treats all such questions as matters of inferior importance. So, when a skeptic asks, why miracles have ceased since the days of Jesus, we may answer in substance as Jesus did, that they have been superseded by greater and better things. "Ye shall do greater works than these." The miracles of conversion, which save a soul from death and hide a multitude of sins, are mightier far than any miracle wrought in the realm of matter. And so, too, when a modern scoffer points to such Old Testament narratives as that of Jacob wrestling with the angel, prevailing over him, and "seeing God face to face," it is vain to argue with him over the bare question of historicity. The only man who can either understand or explain that kind of struggle and triumph is he who has himself been at Peniel, and agonized all night alone with God, and with the dawn beheld the smiling of his heavenly face, and received his blessing. It is only "the pure in heart" who "see God."

**Apologetics*, p. 376.

In like manner Wesley maintained the necessity of personal inspiration of every true believer to understand the deep things of God. In his letter to the Rev. Mr. Potter he argues that one must have "a particular and immediate inspiration before he can either understand, or preach, or live the gospel." "But," says Mr. Potter, "the Scriptures are a complete and sufficient rule. Therefore, to what purpose could any further inspiration serve? The supposed need of it is highly injurious to the written word." To which Mr. Wesley replies: "High sounding words! But, blessed be God, they are only *brutum fulmen* (empty sound); they make much noise, but do not wound. 'To what purpose could any further inspiration serve?' Answer yourself: 'To enlighten the understanding and to rectify the will.' Else be the Scriptures ever so complete, they will not save your soul. * * * When you say yourself, 'The Spirit is to teach us all things, and to guide us into all truth,' judge you, whether this is to 'explain, or to supply, the written word.'"

And so, in one way and another, did that good man of God emphasize the truth that the Scriptures are not an end in themselves, but a means to an end. And that end is the cultivation of spiritual life. And this has been the accepted view of our Methodism from the beginning. We must seek the divine illumination of the Spirit in order to a proper and profitable understanding of the Holy Scriptures.

No Dogma of Biblical Inspiration in Methodist Standards.

I have not been able to find in Wesley's works any dogma or theory of biblical inspiration. Bengel's note on 2 Tim. III, 16, is: "Scripture was divinely inspired, not merely when it was written, God breathing through the writers, but also while it is being read, God breathing through the Scripture, and the Scripture breathing him." Wesley's note is as follows: "The Spirit of God not only once inspired those who wrote it, but continually inspires, supernaturally assists, those that read it with earnest prayer. Hence it is so profitable for doctrine, for instruction, etc."

There is nothing in our Articles of Religion which so much as names a theory of inspiration, but the fifth article affirms (not the inerrancy, nor the infallibility, but) the SUFFICIENCY of the Holy Scriptures for a knowledge of salvation.

Richard Watson, with all his able and detailed discussion of the Evidences of Christianity, in Part First of his *Institutes*, has not a word to offer on the question of a theory of inspiration.

Dr. Miley, in his Systematic Theology, devotes an Appendix to the "Inspiration of the Scriptures." He favors what he calls "the dynamical theory," but rejects "the theory of verbal inspiration" as beset with "perplexing and insuperable difficulties." He gives four reasons for rejecting this theory which he pronounces monergistic and mechanical.

1. The theory cannot be reconciled with the manifest human element in the structure of the Scriptures.

2. It is incompatible with the differences of statement of different biblical writers when narrating the same event; for the verbal variations of statement are utterly inexplicable on the verbal theory.

3. The logic of the theory denies us the real possession of a divine revelation. For the original autographs are lost, and in a thousand texts it is now impossible to determine what the words of the first writing were. Common sense asks what is the value of such a theory of the letter, when the autographs are utterly lost, and all existing texts and versions vary?

4. There is no necessity of such a verbal theory for the maintainance of any essential truth of divine revelation. Facts of Scripture are conclusive against it, and Christ and his apostles often cite the same scripture without any attempt at verbal accuracy.

McClintock and Strong's Cyclopædia, in the article on Inspiration (prepared by Dr. Strong, a mighty opponent of higher criticism), pronounces the theory of verbal inspiration "unnecessary, incorrect, extravagant and objectionable," for the following reasons:

1. Words, as such, are incapable of inspiration.

2. The assumption that we think only in words is plentifully contradicted by every man's consciousness.

3. The suggestion of the *ipsissima verba* to the minds of the sacred writers is incompatible with their personal freedom, and with the varieties and the blemishes of their style.

4. Nothing is gained by asserting the verbal

theory as against the idea that the scriptures contain in substance the highest existing revelation of the mind and will of God.

5. The theory is comparatively recent in the history of theology. It has no standing in the scriptures themselves, and John, the presbyter, Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Chrysostom and Augustine are cited in evidence that none of these fathers of the Church had any definite theory on the subject. The great reformers, Luther, Melanchthon, Calvin and Zwingli, while assigning the highest authority to the sacred writings, did not maintain any such doctrine as that of verbal inspiration. It was in the 17th century that this extravagant theory took definite shape, and it reached its extreme and natural logical finale in the Helvetic creed, which declared that "the Hebrew original of the Old Testament is inspired of God not only in its consonants, but in its vowels—either the vowel points themselves, or at least the power of the points—not only in its matter, but in its words; thus forming, together with the original of the New Testament, the sole and complete rule of our faith and life; and to its standard, as to a Lydian stone, all extant versions, oriental and occidental, ought to be applied, and wherever they differ, be conformed."

So far as I have noticed, in the more bitter assaults that are made against the modern higher criticism and its methods, this theory of verbal inspiration is tacitly if not openly assumed. Even in some cases where opponents have not acknowledged their adherence to this dogma, the assumptions of their arguments imply it, or else are strangely irrelevant. The above showing proves that the dogma has no place in Methodist Standards of doctrine.

When, now, it is asked what the attitude of modern Methodism should be toward modern biblical criticism, our answer is, That which it has been from the beginning, and that which has been our boast and glory from the time of Wesley until now: "We think and let think." We act according to the apostolic precept: "Prove all things; hold fast that which is good." Among the things now quite generally maintained by biblical scholars are the following opinions touching the various books of the Bible:

1. The Bible is not so much a single book as it is a great library, a collection of books of very different dates and authorship.

2. Of a considerable number of the books the authorship is unknown, and opinions vary as to their origin and relative value.

3. Many of these books are of composite origin. The composite character of the Pentateuch, of Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings, Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, the books of Isaiah, Zechariah and Proverbs, is quite generally conceded.

4. The compilation of the Book of Psalms, as it now appears in our Bibles, was the work of the post-exile leaders of the Jewish people.

5. The biblical writers have employed nearly all the forms of literary composition which appear in the other great literatures of the world. We find various styles of prose writing, and also poetry, parable, riddle, symbol, fable and proverb. We also find in these scriptures various types and grades of religious thought.

6. No divine authority, either of Jesus, or of the prophets or apostles, has ever fixed the limits of the biblical canon.

7. The contents of these Scriptures, taken as a whole (whether one accept the Palestinean or

the Alexandrian canon of the Old Testament*), furnish us with a priceless record of the progressive revelation of God in and through the Jewish people. Therefore we call these holy scriptures "oracles of God;" the things which "God spoke of old time unto the fathers in the prophets by divers portions and in divers manners."

There are many critical questions more or less closely connected with each one of these seven points on which there is room for differences of opinion. Some of these questions are of more importance than others, but *not one of them is a fundamental question of religion*. You and I may differ in opinion as to the origin and authorship of a book, the class of composition to which it belongs, and the interpretation of particular passages. We find our honored Methodist fathers differing among themselves in all these ways, and thus illustrating their acknowledged right to "think and let think." I cannot better close this paper than by citing the words of the Rev. Dr. W. T. Davison, a well known leader among the Wesleyans of England, and late president of the British Conference, in an article which appeared in "The Methodist Times" of February 4, 1904. He therein expressed his general approval of Canon Driver's recent work on the book of Genesis, and declares "that we cannot read these early chapters of the Bible precisely as our fathers did. The literalist who believes that by a miracle the serpent spoke in the garden, and that the deluge covered the whole globe, is apt to assume that it is he alone who accepts the Bible as true, whereas his principles of interpretation are really at fault. . . . Methodism will not be behindhand in this work (of criticism and interpretation). Rash-

*That is, the one adopted by Protestants, or that which is accepted by the Roman Catholic Church.

ness is not characteristic of us as a community, and rashness in such matters is little short of wickedness. But timidity is not goodness, and obscurantism is not helpful or kind. The Spirit of truth who inspired the writers of the Sacred Scriptures, and who guided our fathers to read and expound them, will still guide us as we seek to know and teach the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. And it is written—the Master himself has said it—"The truth shall make you free.'"

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